CHAPTER V

Getting Ready For War

A: My orders to the 8th Engineers at Fort MacIntosh, Texas, were countermanded during the winter and I was ordered to Fort Ord, where the 7th Infantry Division was going to be activated. I arrived in early July 1940, and much to my satisfaction I found that I was going to be assigned to the 13th Engineers. The 13th Engineers during World War I was a Railway Regiment. It later became a General Service Regiment, and it was my first assignment. After it was inactivated in the 1930s it became a reserve unit, I think at Iowa State University. In 1940, it was reactivated as a Regular Army unit in the 7th Division, which, of course, had been inactive since World War I, too.

There were 12 officers there when I arrived, including General Stilwell, so I found myself as a captain in command of the 13th Engineer Battalion, my first organization in the Army. I was also commanding the 7th Signal Company. This lasted pleasantly for six weeks or so. Of course, the Signal Officer came along, and then a major came along and took over the battalion, so I dropped back to executive, but at least it was very satisfying. I wrote and found out where the colors were from the Chief of Engineers and he said they were up at Iowa State. I got them to ship the colors and the typewriter, and some other items that they had as part of the unit equipment. Then my daughter arrived in time to present the colors to the battalion. It was quite a day for me, and for her, I'm sure. She was then 15 years old. She'd been a baby at Fort Belvoir (then old Fort Humphreys) where I was first stationed. Incidentally, it occurred to me that since the organization had been inactivated around 1930, where could I find any unit insignia? I wrote back to the post exchange officer at Fort Belvoir, and, lo and behold, he had about 200-300 of the metal insignias that had been left for some ten years in storage, so I got them. I had a cadre of 20 enlisted men from the 2d Engineers. They weren't the greatest, but I felt that a little motivation could make them twice as good as they were, or thought they were, so I boosted them all a grade. We tried to develop esprit and a sense of responsibility, and I must say that these old soldiers responded beautifully. They did a great job. We were still wearing the campaign hat in those days, so in order to

preserve these insignias for the troops themselves when they arrived (Remember, I just had a cadre), I gave them each one of these insignias, which they put in the center eyelet of their campaign hats.

Then we got the troops. The strength of the battalion -- it was a typical Engineer battalion -- was 300 to 350 men. They came from the Kansas-Oklahoma area, so we had a lot of good, hard-working youngsters, a lot of farm boys whom weren't afraid to get their hands dirty and who hours didn't bother, so I had a real good tough-minded outfit. From my standpoint, we made excellent progress. The next thing I knew, the Pentagon decided that the Engineer Battalion had to be doubled in size to do the expected job, and then the new Table of Organization (TO) came out for nearly 700.

I found out that this increment was going to be filled by draftees from the Chicago area, and extra grades for noncommissioned officers were also allotted, too. I was under some pressure immediately before they arrived to distribute all these grades to the then battalion of 300 men. I said, "No, I'm not going to do it. Any of you here who are now deserving of the grade are going to get it, but I'm going to keep most of these vacancies and you're going to have to compete with these others for them." And that's just the way it worked out. These draftees from the city didn't have the skills most country boys had, but they had more education and at least the same level of intelligence. They learned fast, and this competition between the two groups was the best thing that could have happened. We tried to award promotions strictly on merit. We'd graduate them from recruit training, basic training, and give them one insignia. We found these little things, not very big perhaps, but important. When we were ordered to send new cadres out to new units, I had two cadres nominated from each company, and they never knew which one was going. The result was that, when the cadres shipped out (largely to the Engineer School and Fort Leonard Wood), we usually got letters back praising their quality. We weren't shoving our poorest men off on anybody, and it paid dividends. It didn't hurt us; in fact, it helped us in the long run because it built esprit.

Q: I want to ask the old question of which is more important: command, staff, or perhaps a new factor, contact with the outside world. Do you feel that there's an answer?

A: I think command is the more important because until you've got the monkey on your back, you never know how to get it off. I don't think there's any question but what command is the more important. I think that exposure to the facets of life other than military -- in other words social, political, and economic -- and mingling with people in other walks of life so that you can get a decent appraisal of their veiwpoints, even if you don't agree with them, is essential. I think this is important in the broad development of a competent commander or of a competent individual. That is why I believe service with our civilian components in time of peace is so valuable in learning how to handle civilian soldiers in time of war.

In addition to my assignment I was also the Engineer instructor for the Engineer Reserves in the Seattle District. When I would visit a project, that would be the night for training. There would usually be a number of the contractor's people, as well as our own employees, who had Reserve commissions or they'd come in from the colleges or other nearby places. I learned a tremendous amount as an instructor with the Guard and the Reserves, maybe a little more with respect to the Guard, because it was more continuous training.

Early in the autumn I was assigned to take an assault course at Belvoir. The Assistant Chief of Engineers, General Sturdevant, visited the battalion and he saw some ingenious work that we were doing with ammunition, booby traps, assault of bunkers, and deception. This was intriguing for the officers and men; for instance, company commanders would buy 50 mousetraps and a reel of wire and batteries, the mousetraps being for setting off the detonating cap and the charge. This was fresh thinking and these fellows got real ingenious. We used to try to give at least an extra pass to a soldier who would come up with a new idea for a new device.

In the fall of 1940 -- you remember France and the low countries had been overrun -- we studied the German tactics carefully. For instance, we found that the British, in their withdrawal, had frequently caused considerable delay to the Germans by stripping the restaurants of dinner plates as they withdrew, leaving them one by one in the middle of the road. A German tank crew would stop and get out at first. Then they'd get careless, and about the tenth one they hit would really be booby-trapped, and up would go the

tank or truck. Things of this sort really slow down your movements.

About 30 of my contemporaries were with me in this assault course, which really set the pattern for Engineer doctrine during World War II. The real stimulus was probably the German assault and capture of Fort Eben Emael in Belgium, using demolitions and flamethrowers, to attack with small forces and special assault techniques.

Q: You indicated that there were no crises. I noticed that on January 26, 1941, a newspaper report mentioned your name; that the 13th Engineers brought war conditions close to newspaper men here this weekend -- almost too close -- and it talked about sending a group of correspondents and photographers scurrying for cover and smashing the camera and tripod of George Smith, Carmel freelance photographer. Smith had been warned by Captain Trudeau, Executive Officer of the 13th, that he was in a danger zone. I guess you must have convinced these people.

A: I guess I convinced them. I'd forgotten that.

Q: Sir, you eventually were on your way to Fort Leavenworth but instead of going to school, you went as an instructor? Is that correct?

A: No, that's not quite correct, but you're 50 percent right. What happened was that I was ordered to the third Special Course at Leavenworth, which was about a nine-week course, and I started in March 1941. The amazing thing was that when I got there, as I reported in, I was told that the commandant wanted to see me, whereupon I reported to him, General Karl Truesdell. He talked to me for a while and then said, "Well, I hope you do well in the course because you're going to stay as an instructor," and I said, "I am? Sir, I didn't know that." He said, "Yes, you're going to stay as an instructor, so do your best in the course." Well, I intended to do my best anyway, but that was it.

Q: Before we get you to Leavenworth, were there any thoughts you had on your duty with the 13th Engineers that you want to discuss before we go on?

A: Not particularly. It was a fascinating period of troop duty, though, because we knew what we were going to do, that we were going to be used somewhere,

somehow, and by somebody soon. We all felt that we were part of a good division. We put a lot into it, and we got a lot of satisfaction out of it. Several new officers who joined us were successful in war and they have been since; two of them, for instance, both second lieutenants at the time, are highly successful executives of very successful construction companies today.

So let's move on to Fort Leavenworth.